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ABSTRACT

A national survey of 371 public relations officers in four-year colleges and universities examined environmental constraints, style of research, and certain personal characteristics to determine if they differentiate between female and male practitioners. First, with regard to constraints, it was found that female public relations officers were most likely to occupy the "conscience of the organization" role, whereas their male counterparts characterized a "dominant insider" position. A second important finding was that no differences in uses or style of research were found by gender. While this is encouraging, it is apparent that there remain environmental constraints--notably administrator expectations--that need to be addressed and that colleges and universities are not practicing, in their public relations offices, what they are teaching in their classrooms. (Three tables of data are included; 17 references are attached.) (Author/RS)

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WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION PUBLIC RELATIONS: AN INKLING OF CHANGE?

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Summary

Women In Higher Education Public Relations:
An Inkling of Change

A national survey of 371 public relations officers in four-year colleges and universities examines environmental constraints, style of research, and certain personal characteristics to determine if they differentiate female and male practitioners. First, with regard to constraints, female public relations officers are most likely to occupy what we name the "conscience of the organization" role, whereas their male counterparts characterize a "dominant insider" position. A second important finding is that no differences in uses or style of research were found by gender. While this is encouraging, it is apparent that there remain environmental constraints -- notably administrator expectations -- that need to be addressed. Higher education was selected as the context to study in part because it is where we educate future practitioners. It appears that, with regard to gender-related stereotypical expectations, colleges and universities are not practicing, in their public relations offices, what they are teaching in their classrooms.

The status and roles of women in public relations are recurring issues in the communications industry. Documented discrepancies in salaries paid to men and women in comparable positions (Broom 1982; Broom & Dozier 1986) contributed to circumstances termed the "velvet ghetto" (Cline et al. 1986) where female practitioners occupy the lower salaried, usually technician, positions. Subsequent research has contributed a greater understanding of the roles women occupy in organizations (Dozier 1987; Selnow & Wilson 1988) and most recently the attitudes of practitioners themselves toward women in the field (Toth & Cline 1991).

Such research documenting gender differences and their consequences is important, both as a monitor on the profession and for the research it stimulates. Yet, we also need to proceed beyond documenting the existence of gender differences to understanding specific perceptions and behaviors that lead to gender difference effects (like salary). It was consideration of this goal that motivated the current study.

This research seeks to examine certain behavioral styles in public relations work, especially research, and perceived constraints from the work environment, to determine if female and male practitioners perceive and behave in significantly different ways. The purpose is not to suggest that women practitioners should "be more like their male counterparts" nor vice versa. Rather, the aim is to identify a repertoire of behaviors and perceptions that lead to enhanced effectiveness for all practitioners.

One area of the practice (higher education) was selected to defray some of the confounding conditions that arise from contextual differences across types of industries. Conducting a survey of practitioners in higher education also afforded the opportunity to study a population other than the commonly

used membership of PRSA or IABC. Public relations in higher education existed largely as a publicity function from the beginning of the twentieth century (Cutlip et al. 1985; Wilcox et al. 1989). As in other areas of the practice, this emphasis has changed significantly in the past fifteen years (Jacobsen 1978; Halstead 1985) and is today often classified as "institutional advancement." As the function has changed, so has the emphasis on research and planning.

Public relations education has witnessed similar growth and change, as new courses, programs and numbers of students have increased, almost annually (San Jose News, 4-10-91). We wanted to examine the population sub-group whose institutions are the producers of tomorrows practitioners to determine how they, themselves, perceive gender-difference issues.

Systematic research is regarded in public relations as an important feature in the development of heightened professionalism (Ryan & Martinson 1990). Further, scientific research is recognized as one of the key components distinguishing technicians from managers (Broom & Dozier 1986). A developing body of literature has identified factors that constrain the uses of systematic research (Acharya 1985; Grunig & Hunt 1984; McElreath 1977).

This study set out to identify which factors if any, among a wide range of previously identified styles, constraints, and personal/environmental variables, differentiate men and women practitioners in the practice of public relations in institutions of higher education.

Method

A systematic sample of 588 potential respondents was drawn from the 1990 membership directory of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), a non-profit association of college and university practitioners.

A battery of 12 questions developed by Dozier was used to measure research activities (Dozier 1984). A 20 item battery of questions developed by Ryan (1987) was used to assess constraints. Eleven questions addressed respondent demographics and institution description. Four questions enabled respondents to assess time and resource availability and program impact. Finally, each respondent was asked to self-describe his/her job as being primarily a technician or a manager.

Three questionnaire pretests were conducted using faculty, graduate students, and local University public information officers. One mailing to the 588 practitioners and one followup to non-respondents resulted in 371 usable returns, for an effective response rate of 63 percent.

Results

The typical female public relations practitioner in our higher education sample is 41 years of age, holds a bachelors degree plus some additional education, earns $25 to $35 thousand annually, and has been a public relations practitioner in higher education for 8 1/2 years. Note in Table 1 the

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TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

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differences in our sample between male and female practitioners. As is typical of practitioners in other contexts, and reported in other studies, the women respondents in this study are somewhat younger, hold fewer advanced degrees, have practiced fewer years, and make less money than their male counterparts. Observing these, however, we sought to determine if they, as well as situational and style segments, provided significant distinctions among practitioners.

Table 2 reports the results of an exploratory discriminant function analysis where we examined which personal characteristics, constraints and

practitioner style variables have the greatest power of distinguishing male and female practitioners.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

For the higher education practitioners in our sample, when each selected variable was entered into the stepwise discriminant function, twelve of the possible predictors were included. The strongest differentiating characteristic between men and women in our sample is their level of education, where the highest levels (graduate degrees) consistently belong to men. Of greater interest is the second strongest distinguishing trait: practitioners who regard their administration as supportive of differing, at times dissident opinions, are overwhelmingly male.

The next significant distinction between men and women is the intuitive style of preparing public relations materials. This style variable is powerfully related to sex, such that, low involvement with colleagues during preparation of materials is a strong discriminator of female practitioners from male practitioners.

The next significant discriminator of gender is the number of years in public relations. Consistent with other sex roles research, longer service time is most characteristic of men.

The fifth and sixth variables both deal with the systematic, scientific style; the use of formal research techniques (like content analysis) to monitor the dissemination of produced materials is characteristic of male respondents in our sample. In the same vein, the use of formal research (like reviewing relevant published surveys) during the preparation stage of public relations campaigns, is characteristic of female practitioners.

The next two variables are also more characteristic of women. The intuitive behavior of "checking impact by listening to expressed opinions at meetings" is characteristic of females in our sample. Similarly, the engaging of public relations staff in discussions of social responsibility issues is a situational characteristic typical of female practitioners in our sample.

The ninth variable entered as a distinguishing characteristic between male and female practitioners is the opportunity to argue against potentially damaging policies. The perception of this opportunity is strongly associated with male practitioners.

Self-reported role of technician or manager is the tenth variable entered, with the technician designation being consistently predictive of women.

The last two predictors are in uses of scientific research to check the impact of public relations materials. It is more like male practitioners in our sample to examine the impact of materials on target audiences using interviews with selected target audience segments. It is more typical for females to monitor impact through surveys or polls.

Overall the discriminant analysis relating various personal characteristics, perceived constraints, and practitioner style variables relating to sex of practitioner result in a significant canonical correlation coefficient of .385. Further, the classification table reveals that these twelve predictors--three personal/professional characteristics (education, experience, and self defined role) three perceived situational constraints, and six style variables (scientific versus intuitive)--accurately discriminate sex of practitioner in 69.3 percent of all cases.

Given the preponderance of evidence on the relationship between sex and role as either a technician or manager, (Brown and Dozier 1986) we decided

next to examine the subset of our sample that designated themselves as managers only. By so doing, we felt we could control for job description, and thus further isolate style and constraint variables. Thus, we repeated the discriminant analysis, limiting it to the manager-only subgroup, to determine if any of the constraints or styles remained predictive of sex.

Table 3 presents the findings of the subgroup analysis where we examined which personal characteristics, constraints, and style variables have the greatest predictive power of distinguishing male and female managers.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Rather remarkably, of the 243 managers, 123 are males and 120 are females. For these 243 managers, six of the possible predictors were entered into the stepwise discriminant function. The strongest differentiating characteristic between male and female managers is their number of years practicing public relations in higher education where the higher numbers typify males. This is followed by education, where the same pattern found for the whole sample is repeated: advanced degrees are more typically associated with males.

The third strongest differentiating trait among managers is situational: males perceive administrative support for gathering information about all aspects of the institution significantly more than do their female counterparts.

The next significant distinction between men and women is again a personal trait: females are more likely to have prior work experience in media than are their male peers.

The fifth discriminatory factor, an indicant of women, is the perception that the administration engages staff in discussions of social responsibility

issues. Last, the perception of opportunity to argue against policies that could damage the institution is characteristically held by men.

Overall this discriminant analysis results in a significant canonical correlation of .419. The classification table reveals that these six predictors--three personal characteristics (years in the field, level of education, and media experience) and three environmental constraints--are accurate predictors of sex of manager-practitioners for 67.6 percent of cases in this subgroup.

Discussion

Perhaps not surprisingly when the whole sample was considered, differences between men and women emerged in all three areas: personal characteristics, perceived environmental constraints, and scientific or intuitive research styles. Individual differences were found in education and years of experience, where males possess somewhat more of each. The third individual characteristic, designation of role as technician or manager, became the basis for subsequent sub-group analyses.

Beyond individual characteristics, three environmental constraints emerged as significant predictors of sex for the whole sample. Females perceive that they are drawn into discussions of social responsibility issues; this characterizes what we have named a "conscience of the organization" role.

Perhaps not surprising, either, are the perception among many male practitioners that they can argue in the administrative decision-making circle, and can examine information about all points of view. The two constraints, considered jointly, provide a profile of an insider, with access to all information and the authority to argue. These characterize what we call a "dominant insider" role.

The pattern of results from the research style variables show unreliable patterns, suggesting that the presence of technicians in the sample confounds the research style analysis. Both sexes show both intuitive and scientific orientations at all three stages of a campaign: preparation, dissemination, and impact. Of significance is the disappearance of all these research style differences when the managers-only subgroup was analyzed. These differences, explained away by subgroup analysis for gender, are therefore artifacts for the whole sample, suggesting that style variables are more related to role than gender. This important finding suggests that among manager, male and female practitioners share similar research methods in managing various stages of a campaign.

What does remain as significant among the managers is both the power of individual differences and the perception of expectations from the administration. Individual background characteristics remain as distinguishing characteristics between men and women. But beyond these, significantly different perceptions of their administrations' expectations of them exist. A male "voice of dissent and argument" and a female "voice of conscience" appear to be important differences in understanding sex roles among practitioners.

Several conclusions may be drawn from this exploratory study. First, within the practice of public relations in higher education, this research confirms earlier findings of Broom and Dozier that use of scientific research distinguishes technicians from managers. Second, among managers only, the use of scientific or intuitive research techniques does not predict gender. Quite simply, once you are a manager, your use of intuition or science to prepare, distribute and evaluate public relations materials is independent of whether you're male or female. Third, although increased use of scientific research

may contribute to heightened professionalism, there is no "edge" to men or women in its use in higher education. Fourth, while differences disappear in style when we move from the whole sample to managers only, perceived constraints remain as significant predictors of gender. Among managers of the public relations function in colleges and universities, women are impacted by their role as the "social conscience" of the organization. Male peers operate under different perceptions of their role, the "dominant insider.". Men practitioners appear to view themselves as fully able to go "head to head" within the inner circle over policies that affect the institution.

These findings merit closer examination. While it is encouraging to find that professional practices related to research are equally likely among both sexes, it is apparent that there remain some issues--within administrations as well as practitioners--that need to be addressed in order to banish stereotypical responses.

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Table 1

Summary of Descriptive
Characteristics of Sample

	Males N=176 (47.7%)	Females N=193 (52.3%)
Mean Response:		
Age	43.6	41.2
# of years in public relations	14.18	11.29
# or years practicing in a higher education setting	12.2	8.5
personal level of completed education	2.7 (M.A.)	2.4 (BA+)
salary	$45,000 - $55,000	$25,000 - $35,000

Table 2

Summary Exploratory Discriminant Analysis:
Selected Personal Characteristics, Constraints, and Style Variables
as Predictors of the Sex of Practitioner
N=326

		Stepwise Results	
Step	Variable Entered	Standardized Canonical Coefficient	Wilks Lambda
1	level of education	.581[m]	.958***
2	constraint: "administration supports practitioners who speak out against proposed policies"	.430[m]	.938***
3	intuitive preparation "A check communication strategies during preparation by reviewing them with colleagues	.222[f]	.923***
4	years in public relations	.356[m]	.911***
5	scientific dissemination: "monitor dissemination of information through ongoing formal content analysis of news reports & editorials	.406[m]	.903***
6	scientific preparation: "prepare communications by first reviewing relevant published surveys on attitudes of publics involved"	-.371[f]	.890***
7	intuitive impact: "check impact by listening to opinions expressed at meetings & hearings-	-.242[f]	.879***
8	constraint: "administration engages p.r. staff in discussions of social responsibility issues"	-.569[f]	.872***

Step	Variable Entered	Standardized Canonical Coefficient	Wilks Lambda
9	constraint: "receive opportunities to argue against policies that could damage the "institution"	.532[m]	.855***
10	self-designation of role: technician vs. manager	-.173[f]	.852***
11	scientific impact: "check impact through interviews with scientifically selected cross section of target audiences	.273[m]	.848***
12	scientific impact: "check impact through polls or surveys of members of target audiences"	-.180[f]	.846***

Canonical Correlation = .393
Chi Square = 53,329, df = 12, significant at $p < .001$

***$p < .001$

Classification Table

		Predicted Group Membership	
		males	females
Actual Group Membership	males	111 (65.7%)	58 (34.3%)
	females	58 (33.0%)	118 (67.0%)

Percent of grouped cases correctly classified: 66.38%

male	.423
female	-.429

group means for function 1

Table 3

Exploratory Discriminant Analysis:
Selected Personal Characteristics, Constraints and
Style Variables as Predictors of the Sex of Practitioner
Among Self-designated Managers Subgroup
N=243

Step	Variable Entered	Standardized Canonical Coefficient	Wilks Lambda
1	years in public relations in higher education	.611[m]	.929***
2	level of education	.594[m]	.881***
3	"The administration gives its public relations staff the authority to collect information and opinions about all aspects of the institution"	.385[m]	.857***
4	has prior media work experience	-.225[f]	.848***
5	"The administration engages the public relations staff in discussions of social responsibility issues"	-.522[f]	.842***
6	"The public relations staff receives adequate opportunities to argue against policies that could damage the institution"	.488[m]	.824***

Canonical Correlation = .419
Chi Square = 46.063, df = 6, significant at $p < .001$

***$p < .001$

Classification Table

N=253
(males = 126; Females = 127)

		Predicted Group Membership	
		males	females
Actual Group Membership	males	87 (69.0%)	39 (31.0%)
	females	43 (33.9%)	84 (66.1%)

Percent of grouped cases correctly classified: 67.6%

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male	.458
female	.462

group means for function 1